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Smith, Sally; Hunter, David; Sobolewska, Emilia

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Getting in, getting on: fragility in student and graduate identity

Sally Smith*, Edinburgh Napier University, UK

s.smith@napier.ac.uk

David Hunter, Aberystwyth University, UK

dah56@aber.ac.uk

Emilia Sobolewska, Edinburgh Napier University, UK

e.sobolewska@napier.ac.uk

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract Over a period of three years this longitudinal study explored new approaches to consider student identity during the transition from university to employment. Students were followed through a new portfolio-based final year course and beyond university into the workplace. With universities increasingly recognising the employment aspirations of their students, facilitating self-awareness of graduate attributes and the development of employability skills are increasingly part of the higher education proposition. The positive impact of relevant work experience to graduate employment outcomes is well known, however not all students have access to work placement or internships. The impact of alternatives, such as work-related learning, is less well understood. The study uncovered the ways in which role models, developmental networks and imaginings of a possible self were used in identity work. A fragile re-construction of identity was observed as graduates faced the labour market; with this fragility continuing to be experienced while navigating an uncertain work landscape. We conclude by using these findings to allow us to refine Holmes' Graduate Identity Model by (a) adding a dynamic element and (b) grounding it on longitudinal data.

Keywords— student identity, graduate identity, portfolio, employability, curriculum design

Introduction

Universities are being challenged to equip students with both academic and employability skills (Cumming, 2010, p.^pp, Jackson, 2016, p.^pp, Tymon, 2013, p.^pp.), where employability can be seen as 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations' (Yorke, 2004, p.^pp. 7). As a result, there has been interest in the development of graduate or employability attributes in undergraduates (for example, Barrie (2004, p.^pp, Coetzee *et al.* (2012, p.^pp, Harvey (2001, p.^pp, Penttinen *et al.* (2013, p.^pp. . Student perspective studies have explored whether the development of these attributes effect a transformation in self-identity (for example, Daniels and Brooker (2014, p.^pp, Tymon (2013, p.^pp. . To date, attempts to measure impact have focused, in the main, on student perceptions of 'graduateness' (Coetzee, 2014, p.^pp.),'work-readiness' (Kinash *et al.*, 2014, p.^pp.), reflection (Steur, Jansen, and Hofman 2012) or traits such as self-efficacy and resilience (Yorke & Knight, 2007, p.^pp.). However, gaining graduate employment is challenging in a context of fewer graduate vacancies than graduates (Abel *et al.*, 2014, p.^pp, Docherty & Fernandez, 2014, p.^pp, Green & Zhu, 2010, p.^pp.) and some sectors are turning to evidence beyond degree classification, such as extra-curricular activity or portfolios of evidence (Jing *et al.*, 2011, p.^pp, Oliver, 2013, p.^pp.).

Of course, success in finding a graduate job is only one measure of employability. The transition from student to employee as a lived experience through self-identification offers another window onto the processes associated with graduation and job seeking. Such an insight can provide evidence of the effectiveness of employability interventions through emerging student and graduate self-narratives constructed to explain 'who I am' and 'how I got here'. This view deals less with what universities *do* to students and more with how employability initiatives change students' self-concepts.

This paper explores the development of an employer-facing portfolio reflecting the students' evolving sense of who they are; that is, their identity. Over a period of three years, data was collected from 2 cohorts in the final year of study. The first cohort was followed out into the workplace. By following students into work the impact of interventions can move beyond perceptions of employability into experiences of employment.

In consideration of identity

We selected Identity Theory, whereby identity is considered to be 'parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play' (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284), to provide a theoretical perspective. Identity Theory holds that we construct a self-concept based on the roles we enact and recognises multiple co-existing identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p.^pp, Korte, 2007, p.^pp, Miner, 2002, p.^pp.). Role identity proponents believe that the core of an identity is the categorisation of self as a role holder (McCall and Simmons (1978, p.^pp. . People behave in a somewhat predictable way based on the roles that they carry out, so studies focus on role enactment and role performance, such as the role of student with subsequent expectations of typical behavior (Holden *et al.*, 2015, p.^pp, Langendyk *et al.*, 2015, p.^pp.). This holds true for both student and graduate identities; with differing norms and behaviours for each identity (Heise 2002). As such, identity can shed light on the transition between education and work through roles of student and graduate.

For many students, the purpose of university is to gain graduate work; a professional role. Professional identity, one possible emergent identity, is considered to be a self-definition constructed from skills, experience, capability, values and attributes in the context of a professional role (Beijaard *et al.*, 2000, p.^pp, Ibarra, 1999, p.^pp.). In a university setting, the term pre-professional identity has been used to encompass the skills and capabilities of students together with 'conduct, culture and ideology of a student's intended profession' (Jackson, 2016, p.^pp.) and has been observed through meaningful discipline-based experiences such as real-world problem solving and simulated work environments (Pierrakos *et al.*, 2009, p.^pp.).

Identity work, identity adaptation and the transition from student to professional

Identity work has been defined to be the construction of identity through interaction with others, drawing upon social processes such as interaction with role models (Felstead, 2013, p.^pp, Higgins & Kram, 2001, p.^pp, Rosenthal et al., 2013, p.^pp, Singh et al., 2006, p.^pp, Wright & Wright, 1987, p.^pp.), developmental networks (i.e. those who take an interest in an individual's development or progression) (Dobrow et al., 2012, p.^pp, Dobrow & Higgins, 2005, p.^pp, Sweitzer, 2009, p.^pp.) and experimenting with possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p.^pp, Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008, p.^pp.).

As students transition to the workplace they are likely to experience significant disruption in their self-identification through recognisable sensebreaking as their identity is challenged (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). Sensebreaking 'involves a fundamental questioning of who one is when one's sense of self is challenged . . . [creating] a meaning void that must be filled' (Pratt, 2000, p. 464). Students are called on to think about who they will be as a graduate, the type of work they place value in and the skills and attributes they can demonstrate. A dynamic process of claiming identities through new self-narratives (Alvesson, 2010, p.^pp.) or affirmation by academics and employers (Holmes, 2001, p.^pp.) will create risks and opportunities as consolidated student identities are no longer secure (Beech et al. 2008). Work-related learning courses may provide students with pre-professional role requirements, while creating opportunities for role model interactions and subsequent enactment. In other words, creating the conditions for negotiated professional or pre-professional identities which are claimed by the individual and affirmed by academics (Holmes, 2001, p.^pp.).

Indeed recently researchers have challenged a skills development approach to employability, finding favour instead with notions of an *employable* self-identification by students and graduates (Tomlinson, 2010; Holmes, 2013). Holmes proposes a model based on identity claims and affirmation. Figure 1 shows Holmes' four zones of identity, or identity positions. An employable identity is claimed by the individual and affirmed

(Zone 4); by academics within an institution and by employers within the workplace (Holmes 2001, Holmes 2013).

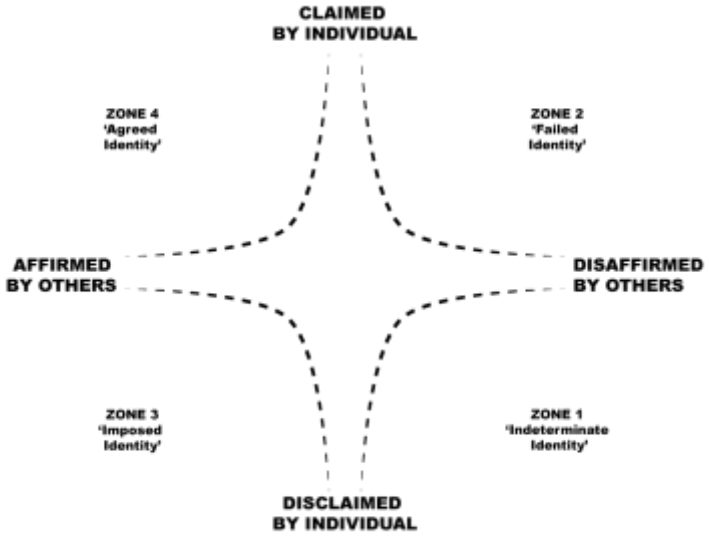

Figure 1: Claim-affirmation model of emergent identity (Holmes 2001, Holmes, 2013)

At the centre of the model lies an undetermined identity with outer zones for indeterminate, imposed, agreed and failed identities. Transition between zones is largely determined by agentic claims and external affirmation or disaffirmation. As an example, a student makes an identity claim through activity in a simulated work environment, tutors affirm through feedback and an 'agreed identity' is achieved (Zone 4). A student approaching a similar activity in a casual, disorganised manner, whose work is not considered suitable, is likely to remain in Zone 1 ('indeterminate identity'). Using this model, Holmes (2013) calls upon universities to provide an environment wherein each student is asked to formulate their 'claim on the identity (of being a graduate worthy of employment) in such a way that it stands a good chance of being affirmed by those who make the selection decision on job applications' (p. 551). The story of transition from university to work is

increasingly problematic: *getting in* to the workplace is one challenge, *getting on* once there is another. Holmes' model is reliant on both self and others however the interplay is not fully explained, and there is, as yet, little empirical evidence to support the model.

The study context

As part of a university-wide graduate employability project a final year course was introduced at a UK university which related directly to a consideration of professional identity combined with an opportunity for portfolio development in an attempt to support digital media students transitioning from university to the workplace. In additional to portfolio expansion and consolidation, the course included embedded careers activity such as CV preparation workshops, an assessed job application, mock interviews, a networking workshop and a careers fair. Producing a portfolio enables students to showcase examples of their work, highlighting their professional capabilities and their underlying work ethic (Wakimoto and Lewis 2014). In employability skills development, graduate portfolios have been found to impact positively on graduate destinations (for example, Oliver 2013; Knight and Yorke 2003; Jing, Patel, and Chalk 2011). The digital technologies sector overall increasingly relies on sample work when making recruitment selection decisions (Gandini 2015; Mietzner and Kamprath 2013). The portfolio represents how graduates wish to present themselves and their work to a prospective employer - to some extent reveals something of who they are (Trede and McEwen 2012) and, as such, developing their portfolio of work reflects an emerging self-narrative. The course integrated previous knowledge and skills with individually identified enhanced skills development to prepare students for professional life. As a pathway to professional identity, students were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of higher education (Davis, 2006, p.^pp, Luehmann, 2007, p.^pp.) and the extent to which they had developed skills, generic graduate attributes and self-concept as a professional.

Method

A longitudinal study was designed to run over 3 years, following the first student cohort into employment. Table 1 details the full data set.

Table 1: Type and quantity of data collected during three year study

Year of study	Questionnaire pre-course (n)	Questionnaire post-course (n)	n (completed both pre and post questionnaires)	Student Interviews (n)	Student essays (n)	Graduate interviews (sampled from cohort 1) (n)
1 (Cohort 1)	43	34	27	7		
3 (Cohort 2)	50	37	20		20	7

Students were surveyed pre and post-course in the first year of the study (Cohort 1). The pre-course questionnaire distributed during the first week of the course, explored the nature of identity in relation to study and wider student experiences together with perspectives on their portfolio of work. The second questionnaire, completed at the end of the course, re-iterated questions to reveal changes in identity, observe aspects of identity work and re-visit participants' attitudes to their portfolios. The questionnaire returns were indexed and anonymised. This data was used to determine follow up interview questions. In the interviews, students were asked how they envisaged their professional lives and how well prepared they felt in terms of skills and capabilities for their next steps. The initial study of the first cohort has been previously reported (Smith *et al.*, 2014, p.^pp.). Two years later the questionnaires were repeated for a new cohort (Cohort 2) and reflective essays were included in the data sample. At that time Cohort 1, who had graduated 18 months previously, were contacted through social media, invited to participate and graduate interviews conducted. Seven agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted over video conferencing and the average time per interview was 30 minutes. Graduates were asked about their current employment activities and the process of adjustment following university. Five were male and two female.

Findings

Identity in transition

To explore self-identification, students were asked if they agreed with statements such as 'Being a student is important to me.' Students were able to select one of five possible responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Figure 2 summarises participant responses to questions of identity. The percentage values in the table show the number of students who either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements.

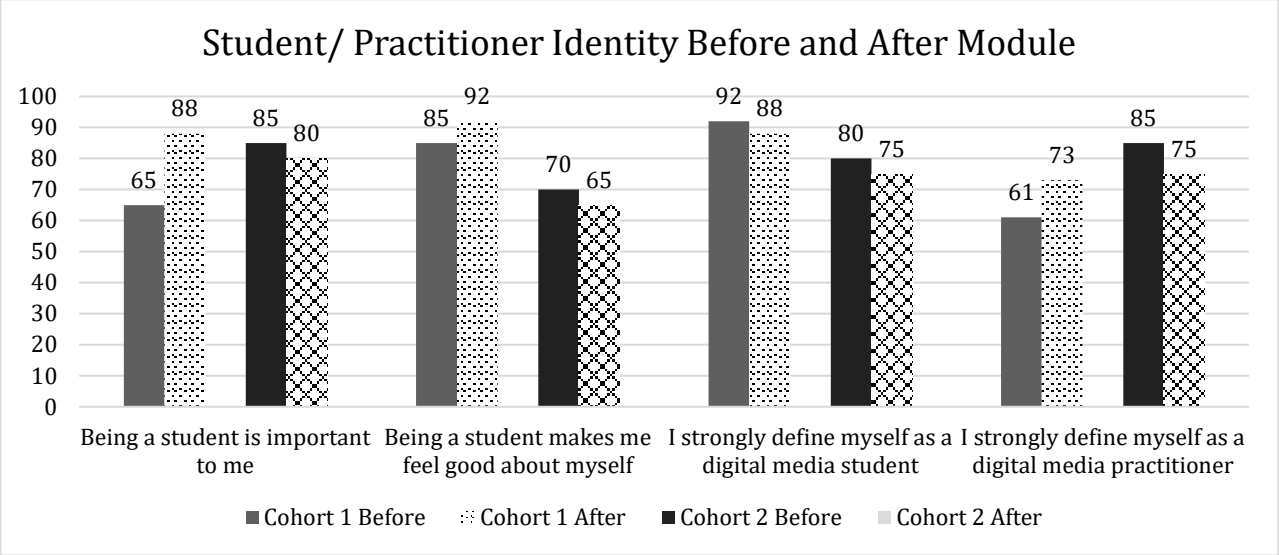

Figure 2: Student and practitioner identities

For both cohorts the majority of students placed importance on their student identity at the end of the course (88%, 80%). For the first cohort the percentage agreeing or strongly agreeing that being a student was important increased from 65% to 88%. A statistical analysis did not reveal reliable differences between cohorts.

Respondents also felt good about themselves as students at the end of the course (92%, 65%). Strong identification as a *digital media* student tended to decrease from the start of the course to the end (-4%, -5%). This was due to increasing specialisation of their portfolio work leading to more specific associations. Definition as practitioners was strong but the experience of the course had different effects on the cohorts

(+12%, -10%). Overall, however, the percentage of the cohort at the end who defined themselves as practitioners was similar (73%, 75%).

Students were asked about role models in the industry and what support they offered. In the first questionnaire there were a number of responses suggesting that they could identify role models but were unsure how they could make use of them (for example, 'I have some friends working in the industry but do not see how I could benefit from them'). The question was posed again in the second questionnaire and the same student responded: 'I have friends and peers that work in the industry and there is a definite level of support.' This student's response to having a strong practitioner identity changed from 'neither agree nor disagree' to 'agree'.

During the course, students were encouraged to start developing professional networks and they mentioned guest lecturers and master classes as ways of meeting people in the industry. The second questionnaire asked which aspects of their university experience had moved the participants on in terms of their professional development. The most common factor mentioned in the open responses (at 47%) was the mock interview. The mock interview was an opportunity to experiment with a possible self, trying on a new identity. As one student commented: 'the mock interviews were a great tool for me, it gave me a good outlook on my professional development.' Specific skills development was also cited, along with project-based courses, credit-bearing internships and student exchanges. Perhaps partially explaining different responses to the course itself, one student commented: 'if people are not prepared [for work], that's more due to personality' while one student, who stated that she was not sure how she managed to reach final year, commented, 'so much work, not enough motivation.' The importance of developing a significant body of work before graduation was in general recognised and one of the students reported having 'sacrificed marks for professional work.' Course leaders, project supervisors and tutors were mentioned in most responses as providing not just academic guidance but as enablers for identity adaptation through the affirmation afforded by mastery and facilitating

student development of new self-narratives as digital experts, for example through portfolio design and planning.

Examining portfolio development

To observe the impact of the course on the students' portfolios, they were asked about how they might describe the content of their portfolios. Responses from strongly agree to strongly disagree were used and Figure 3 represents the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with the statements.

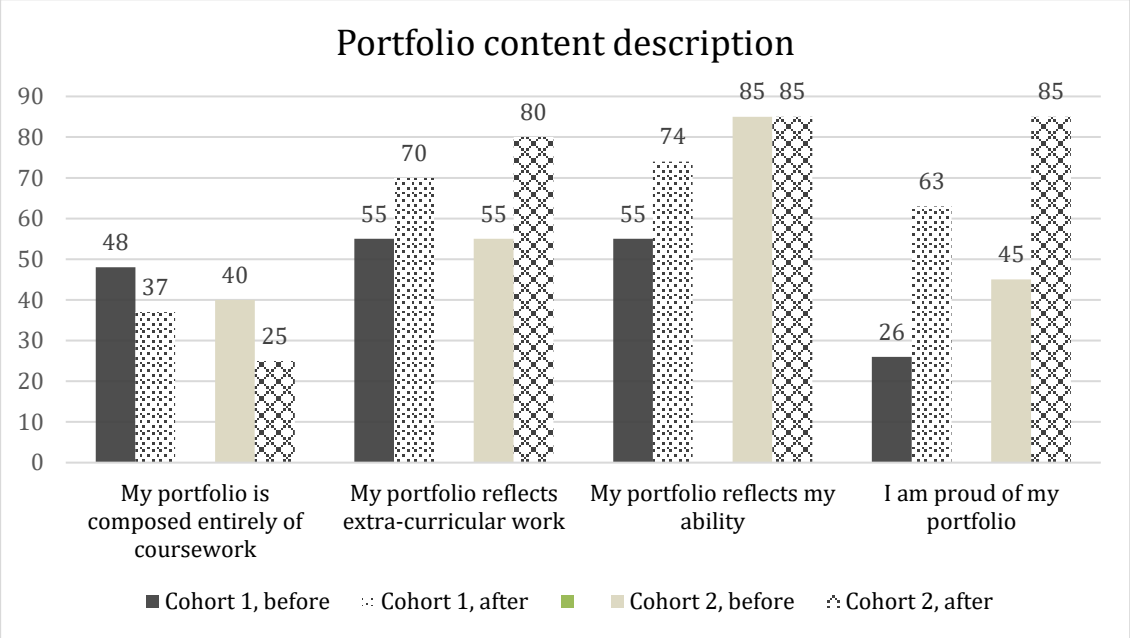

Figure 3: Portfolio content description

One of the aims of the course was to encourage students to add content to their portfolios that had not been generated as part of their coursework, for example embedding any extra-curricular work or personal projects. In both cohorts the numbers of students relying only on coursework for their portfolios fell. The proportion of students who felt that their portfolios reflected their extra-curricular work rose, giving more students an opportunity to develop a narrative of work beyond their course. Less than half of the cohort in each year group expressed pride in their portfolio at the start of the course and both cohorts reported a substantial increase (+37, +40) in pride during the course of the semester.

Students were asked about the state of their portfolios and the responses are shown in Figure 4.

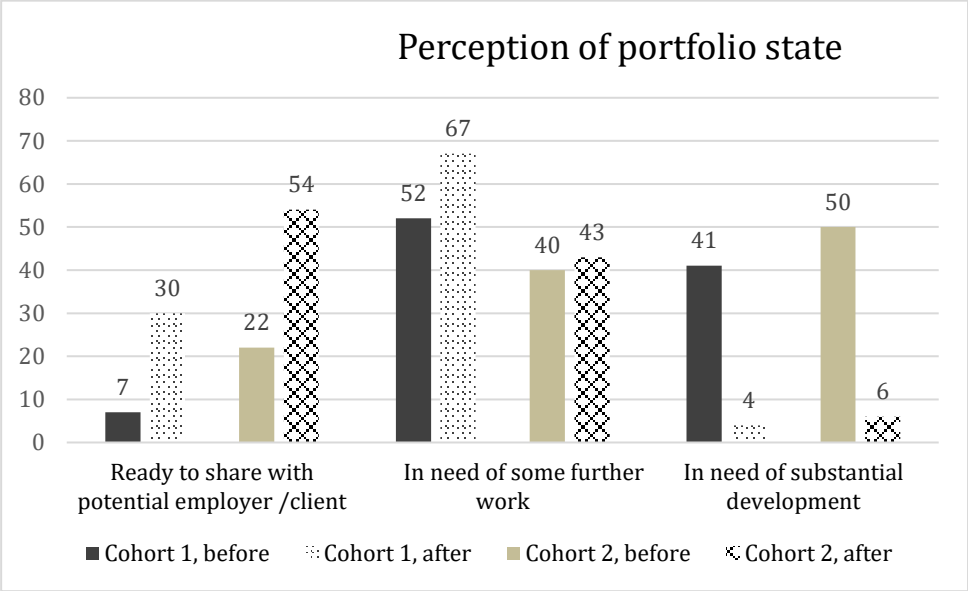

Figure 4: Perception of portfolio state

Although the year groups started from substantially different baselines, both felt their portfolios were substantially improved over the course of the semester. In both cohorts a greater percentage felt that their portfolio was ready to share with potential employers at the end of the course compared with at the start (+23, +32). Many students felt that their portfolios still required development at the end of the course, perhaps understanding the portfolio as an ongoing process of development.

The second questionnaire invited students to comment on what they felt their portfolio said about them, inviting identity claims. Students mentioned professionalism but also confidence and motivation: ‘That I have the motivation to do well; my portfolio is well designed and reflects me as a person.’ Students cited horizons beyond specific skills and capabilities: ‘I believe my portfolio demonstrates my ability to work not just as a graphic designer but as a digital professional who can approach a task confidently.’ There were no unqualified negative comments but some self-awareness evident in: ‘As always it could be improved, but I am comfortable with it.’ In the follow up interviews one student mentioned that she had always been quite negative about her own work admitting that ‘I might not like my work but at least I can show people now.’

Findings from the graduate interviews

The results above represent students shortly before graduation. In order to investigate self-identification and how attitudes to portfolios evolved after graduation, interviews with seven participants from Cohort 1 were arranged between 18 months to two years after graduation. The interviews explored experiences of transition from education to work. Although a small sample, the diverse experiences shed light on an uncertain post-graduation labour market for this group of creative computing students. As one would expect, the experiences of the cohort varied significantly after they graduated. Two were in graduate digital media jobs (DM), two in IT roles (IT), two were day-job strivers (DS) - in non-graduate roles but continuing to seek graduate roles - and one was resigned to a non-graduate role (NR). The DM graduates revealed self-concepts as competent creative computing professionals, however looked to their organisations for identity affirmation including further training. They also acknowledged the need for outside of working hours self-development. The two graduates in IT roles had embarked on traditional software development careers in medium to large corporate institutions. They had constructed and consolidated new IT professional identities and although they no longer showed interest in digital media careers, for each, there was a sense that they would look for creative computing jobs if the work eventually proved uninteresting. Of the three interviewees who were in non-graduate employment, two continued to develop their skills through freelance creative projects (DS). Both considered their full-time employment to be 'day-jobs' that didn't reflect their aspirations or how they saw themselves and were actively pursuing creative project work. The final interviewee was in non-graduate employment (NR), was highly disillusioned and was not actively pursuing a digital media related career. In her words:

> The applications were quite long and tedious and, then I never ever heard back from anyone, so then I applied for less and less and less until it got the point to where I just started applying for things that weren't relevant at all.

Following transcription and initial coding of transcripts based on identity adaptation literature conducted by a single researcher, thematic analysis (for thematic analysis see, for example, King, 2012) revealed four emergent themes: i) technical skills as a source of professional identity; ii) agency and discomfort in building professional networks; iii) the use of role models; v) portfolio pride and use. These are described in turn below.

1) *Technical skills as a source of professional identity*

As identified in the literature of professional identity from multiple disciplines, participants made statements that strongly linked technical knowledge and skills to their identity as professionals. For example, when reflecting on professional development over the past two years, one graduate expressed pride in being professionally certified by Amazon and Google, another that his company had 'a great interest in developing me as a professional person.' Others considered technical skills in utilitarian terms, for example, 'you see a lot of personal study time which, you know, it's paying off' and these participants continued to see technical skills as a resource for positive identity claims.

2) *Agency and discomfort in building professional networks*

Defining agency as the sense that respondents perceived professional networks as allowing them to achieve their goals together with some associated action, professional networks emerged as an important factor in career progression for all respondents and were mentioned by all participants. Four of the participants identified professional networks as important in finding work. All focused on the value of professional networks in terms of practical benefits, in particular to gain access to professional opportunities ('you just got to put yourself out there') and professional knowledge transfer. The lines between professional and social networks were blurred, especially when project work or new contacts were offered by friends and others. Some expressed views related to their own behaviour: 'I kind of made myself known for those opportunities that arise' and 'I am not too

ashamed to say, I was just starting pestering folk, finding people who I thought were, you know, the best in their industries.'

Although all participants acknowledged professional networks as important, not all expressed comfort operating within them, for example describing attempts to network as necessary but finding themselves 'not in a comfortable situation.' Indeed, learning to operate within a professional network was revealed as an important part of working within the creative industry not recognisably covered in their programme. Participants conveyed a picture of being resigned to compulsion, for example, pushing themselves to network and seeing themselves as 'pestering.' It is likely recognising the diversity of the programme, that students had varied prior experience of networking and the experience gained on the course appeared to have more impact on motivation to network than confidence in their ability to do so.

3) *Role models*

Little self-conscious use of role models was observed, however, participants looked to those already acting as industry professionals. One summed this up;

> I was kind of stepping into a bit of the unknown, so there was a lot of time, you know looking to my peers, my colleagues, kind of getting a feel for how they worked and [em] adopting certain aspects of that.

Another mentioned colleagues who were 'really clued up tech-wise' as role models Not all role models were, however, used for positive identity adaptation. Indeed, anti-role models were also observed, with graduates recognising the status of the role model but choosing not to model their behavior.

4) *Portfolio pride and use*

Attitudes to portfolios were mixed within the respondent group. A common sentiment was that the portfolio had been useful in obtaining employment, but was less relevant two years on, for example, 'I haven't really developed [it] that much since, because it kind of served its purpose at the moment.' Respondents that

considered themselves to have a successful career viewed the portfolio as instrumental in getting early opportunities and mentioned the portfolio as being of interest at interviews. Those who had not yet found graduate roles, but were still actively looking for both full-time roles and projects, were keeping their portfolios up to date and this included significant investment in their own time, costly equipment and software licenses.

Discussion

In observing how students experienced their identities as emerging professionals, Costello (2005) identified the following common stages: initial status, initiation events leading to a transitional status, redefinition, leading to a new status. Our data are in line with this but reveal a fragile new status rather than a consolidated identity position. The findings of the study are now discussed in terms of the students' construction of an 'employable' identity through initiation events, consideration of transitional status and, finally, exploring redefinition as a graduate to reach a proposed re-conceptualisation of the graduate adaptation process.

Initial status and initiation events

With its overt emphasis on employability, the course constituted an initiation event which introduced sensebreaking while affording students resources for identity adaptation (Ashforth *et al.*, 2014, p.^pp.). The course increased consideration of identity through both teaching material and coursework reflection based on skills development.

For cohort 1, student identity unexpectedly increased between pre and post-course questionnaires and this was explored through open comments and follow-up interviews. Factors included the intensity of the university experience in the final semester of the four-year degree and anxiety about the future. After four years as undergraduates, the disruption of final year was found to be challenging their self-identification and was manifested in increased student identity commitment. Anticipation of identity loss is a consideration in role transition (Conroy and O'Leary 2014). Furthermore, the course constituted sensebreaking: challenging students

to consider the transition from student to life beyond university. Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly's (2014) study of work identities found participants engaging in sensemaking to secure restoration of positive self-identification, while Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) argue that individuals are only able to make a successful identity shift when they are successful in resolving conflicts and contradictions between their identity narratives. For our participants, student identity represented a coherent self-image with associated status. The increase in self-identification as both students and practitioners points to the start of a process of letting go of a cherished identity (or, where letting go is resisted, to unresolved identity conflict).

In terms of developmental networks, many mentioned the need to explain to people what it meant to be studying creative computing and observed that family and friends outwith the course asked to see their work. Not all interactions strengthened a sense of identity, for example, one student said, 'Everybody seems to be shocked that I do this course. They can't picture me using a computer.' Students showed increased awareness of the nature of industry contacts and professional networks and had used these to enhance their online profile, inform their decisions about job searching or further study and provide external projects. These types of interactions have previously been linked to the construction of a professional identity (for example, Sweitzer (2009, p.^pp. . However, some were uncomfortable about leveraging professional networks. Elsewhere, those lacking social capital have considered networking for personal gain 'cheating' (Abrahams 2016, 8).

Transitional status – towards a professional identity

The questionnaires and interview data provide evidence of a tentative transitional status. Although many students recognised a change in their self-perceptions, their skills and capabilities and how they and their work would be viewed externally following graduation, many lacked confidence facing an uncertain future. Representing an identity claim, students generally expressed an increased pride in their portfolios at the end of the course which led to increased confidence in showing their work to others, including potential employers. The course afforded students an opportunity to consider strategies for self-development (Cranney et al. 2005). There was evidence of students constructing a pre-professional identity through improved skills and

capabilities and many students mentioned the opportunity to specialise in one aspect of creative computing. Such inculturation has been found elsewhere to contribute to the construction of a pre-professional identity (Jackson 2016). Identity adaptation resources mentioned included academic-supported identity claims through presentation of completed coursework and portfolio pieces. Identity work has also been linked to identity struggle for coherence (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.^pp.) and the portfolio self-evaluation represented evidence of emerging identity coherence. There were tentative claims of professional status ('[my portfolio] says I can follow through'). Students were positive about the mock interviews arranged as part of the course and used this opportunity to be viewed as a practitioner in a safe environment, a phenomenon observed elsewhere in professional identity construction (Ibarra, 1999, p.^pp.). For some students the portfolio was a chance to develop a new self-narrative. There was also evidence of a change in self-conception such as students noting that exhibiting work to the public enhanced their confidence.

Graduates and a fragile re-definition

The seven recent graduates interviewed were observed to have re-constructed identities; however, the re-construction was generally fragile, as observed through tentative identity claims and recognition of the need for ongoing skills development. Those in relevant careers had worked hard to obtain their graduate roles and it was clear that they viewed not just their work as being judged when applying for jobs but also what their work revealed about their inner selves. Rejection, especially through being ignored by employers, was experienced as a personal disaffirmation (Holmes, 2013). For those who had a negative experience of applying for work, for example, applying unsuccessfully initially for skilled practitioner roles and finally accepting non-graduate roles, the disaffirmation of a lack of interest shown in applications eroded identity claims as a skilled graduate. Resilience, the ability to bounce-back after adversity, has been found to have two components: personal competence and acceptance of self and life (Wagnild & Young, 1993, p.^pp.). With a fragile self-concept emerging over a significant time of personal change, both personal competence and sense of self was

challenged through job application rejections. Indeed, a sense of personal competence was affected by both the lack of response from employers and erosion of mastery through lack of practice. The day-job strivers were 'sticking it out' (Finn 2016, 8), holding on to their ambition to work in the creative industry. Echoing findings elsewhere (for example, Bathmaker et al., 2013; Purcell et al., 2012) both day-job strivers had access to economic, social and cultural capital that facilitated an extended period of low-paid work with more interesting, less well-funded project work running in parallel or between jobs.

Apart from workplace colleagues, there was little evidence of role models being used in identity construction. Near role models surfaced when prompted but were experienced both as a limited resource for identity adaption through modelling behavior but also as anti-role models whose status was acknowledged but whose behavior was not modelled. Anti-role models can be useful as part of a wider developmental network (Shen *et al.*, 2015, p.^pp.) with agency in disassociation evidence of an identity claim. Tutor signposting of placement and internship opportunities was recognised by the graduates as mentoring. Mentors have been found to contribute to clarity of identity construction (Dobrow *et al.*, 2012, p.^pp, Dobrow & Higgins, 2005, p.^pp, Sweitzer, 2009, p.^pp.). Imagining a future possible self while still a student was remembered by the graduates, for example, the mock interview helped to 'make myself more aware of how I present myself to companies.' However, in a graduate role, there was evidence of enactment that did not feel authentic, especially where their career represented opportunistic compromise. Indeed, the imaginings of possible selves and enactment were suggestive of tentative or fragile identity construction. Identity claims based on skills, use of role models, possible selves and developmental networks, were tentative and graduate self-identification fragile and contingent.

Re-conceptualising Holmes' Graduate Identity Model

Overall a picture of identity claims and affirmation leading at times to a fragile redefinition emerged. Super-imposition of the lived experiences of the four graduate groupings leads us to a tentative re-conceptualisation

of Holmes' Graduate Identity Model (2001, p.^pp.) as proposed in Figure 5. In particular, we propose replacing the 'failed' identity of Holmes' model (claimed by the individual, disaffirmed by others) with a 'fragile' identity to recognise the porous nature of the affirmation/ disaffirmation axis observed in this study and the somewhat faltering identity claims made by the graduates. The 'fragile' identity also represents a starting point for most students in this study as they approach graduation.

Graduate trajectories for the three groupings identified in this study (digital media professionals (DM), IT professionals (IT), day-job strivers (DS) and the graduate in a non-graduate role (NR) are plotted on axes comparing individual identity and affirmation/disaffirmation by individual circumstances. Individual identities at a particular time point are shown as circles labelled with the graduate categorisation. Transitions are shown as an arrow between two time points and marked with the stated cause of the transition.

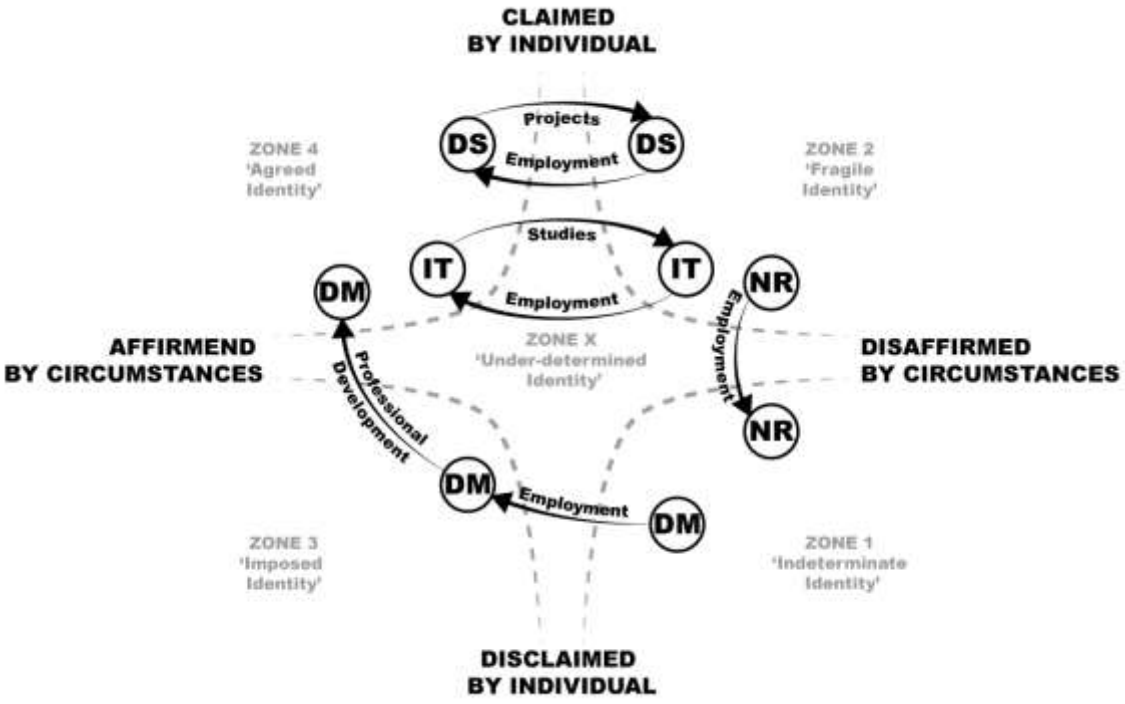

Figure 5: Re-conceptualisation of Holmes Graduate Identity Model (2013)

DM-In digital media employment; IT-information technology employment; DS- day-job strivers; NR-non-graduate role.

In this study, those working as digital media professionals were experiencing agreed identities through considerable effort and self-development – identities claimed by them and affirmed by their organisations and colleagues (Zone 2 to Zone 4). Those in an IT, rather than creative role, had accommodated a new self-image in a positive though tentative way: 'just a development of me, rather than not what I did at university' (Zone 1 to Zone 4). Both of the day-job strivers had experienced periods of unsuitable employment and developed new or enhanced skills beyond the degree course to construct fragile practitioner identities that relied heavily on the affirmation afforded by relevant project work or employment. Employment, including specific project work which was done alongside paid non-graduate work, acted as an affirmation by circumstance (Zone 2 to Zone 4 – and back). Finally, the graduate in a non-graduate role had 'applied for everything' she could see relating to her specialism. Her experience acted as disaffirmation, with identity positioning in 'deficit, outsider terms' (Badenhorst and Kapp 2013, 474) (Zone 2 to Zone 1).

Attempts to find a graduate job led some to apply for jobs outside their chosen degree resulting in both positive self-recognition of new skills but also identity conflict, with enactment stubbornly inauthentic. As Green et al. (2009) observed, the role of the academic was pivotal. In this study, curriculum development secured space for further development of technical skills and offered identity affirmation to propel students into the workplace. Individual experiences and dispositions beyond their fragile identities as professionals led to different trajectories. Where academics had provided affirmation through job and internship recommendations or through curriculum changes which brought students and industry together, self-identification as skilled practitioners was better consolidated, less fragile. One final observation from a graduate, when asked about his adjustment to professional life, said 'personally I don't feel that university could ever replicate a day-to-day job.'

Conclusion

Students in their final year of study face the challenge of transitioning between university and a fast changing workplace. Both the degree of identity fluidity during the transition from student to graduate, and the fragility of self-identification in the early career stage emerged as considerations for universities in this study. This study applied identity theory over the course of three years to explore the impact of a portfolio development course. We observed identity construction as students refreshed, renewed and developed technical skills and capabilities, while rehearsing narratives about themselves as professionals. Meaningful identity work included imagining possible professional selves facilitated by a portfolio development course. The impact of building and leveraging networks and mentors should not be underestimated by universities and curriculum designers; together with a recognition that not all students experience the same levels of access (or attitudes) to such resources. Two years post-graduation, an initial fragile self-identification was observed, with identity claims made through enhanced skills development and affirmed by the circumstances of relevant employment. The sample size was small, however fragility of graduate self-identification highlights the challenges for universities in designing meaningful alternatives to relevant work experience. Institutional learning and discourse can result in a desired new self-identification. However, where circumstances led to disaffirmation (for example through extended periods of unsuccessful job seeking) an indeterminate identity can limit career development. With a volatile labor market and rapidly changing working roles, graduates who are unable to apply their discipline specific expertise, and who do not see an acceptance of life and self in a different role, may face challenges in adopting self-narratives which reflect graduate selves.

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